

VII. CONCLUSIONS

General McGiffert said that the battle of An Loc was "an American show in its essence."¹ Indeed, as Major John Howard said, it was "the war we came to fight."² As Andrew Krepinevich so aptly points out, the United States had never been comfortable fighting a counterinsurgency war. American forces were not principally equipped and organized for such operations; they were designed to bring superior technology and firepower to bear on a foe who fought in the open under "normal" rules.

The American way of war called for U.S. forces to close with and destroy the enemy by firepower and maneuver. There is some debate that the emphasis was on firepower rather than maneuver. Nevertheless, the North Vietnamese and Vietcong refused to provide the appropriate targets for this type of attrition-based warfare, with its heavy reliance on technology and firepower. Although North Vietnamese and Vietcong forces were confident in their own tactical skills, they knew that they could not match the Americans' ability to mass indirect and aerial fires for extended periods of time. Consequently, the Communist forces fought their own style of war designed to negate the American advantages. They generally refused to fight the type of battles that would allow the Americans to prevail, opting for hit and run tactics and avoiding set piece battles of long duration.

In 1972, General Giap and his fellow North Vietnamese generals made a serious mistake when they decided to abandon their previously successful strategy and initiate conventional attacks against the South Vietnamese. An Loc was a battle the Americans were trained and equipped to fight. When ARVN leadership and resolve wavered, General Hollingsworth and his advisers provided the technical expertise and fighting spirit to stabilize a desperate tactical emergency.³ American firepower and American advisers, fighting in the American way of war, enabled the ARVN defenders to win a great victory (or at least stave off a disastrous defeat).

Unfortunately, this victory led to a fatal set of perceptions, both for the Americans and the South Vietnamese. Many ARVN soldiers fought valiantly under conditions never seen before in the history of the Southeast Asia war. Yet the battle had been close, and many South Vietnamese leaders and units had not done well. Nevertheless, the Nixon administration promoted the South Vietnamese victory as a vindication of the Vietnamization program. The President made statements that the South Vietnamese had demonstrated that they

were ready to prosecute "their war" without American help. Many in the American press agreed; Joseph Alsop wrote after the battle of An Loc, "ARVN has a damn good record in this fighting; ARVN has proven itself . . ." ⁴

Both Michael MacLear and Lieutenant General Phillip B. Davidson maintain that President Nixon put the best face on the South Vietnamese performance in 1972 to validate the Vietnamization policy and provide the justification for completing the American withdrawal from Vietnam.⁵ Davidson further maintains that even as early as 1968, "any cold-blooded analysis of the capacity of the South Vietnamese to carry out their part of Vietnamization would have argued against its adoption."⁶ This evaluation was supported by examining other battles prior to 1972, such as the Lam Son 719 debacle in 1971, which clearly demonstrated that the South Vietnamese were not ready to take over the war.⁷ This operation involved an invasion of the North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Laos and was made by South Vietnamese forces without U.S. support; the ARVN forces were badly bloodied.

The fact that U.S. tactical leadership and firepower were the key ingredients in the battle for An Loc was either lost in the mutual euphoria of victory or ignored by Nixon administration officials who wanted to get the United States out of Vietnam in the most expeditious manner. The victory at An Loc provided the rationalization for the complete withdrawal.

Even though South Vietnamese forces had learned some valuable lessons and made strides in improving their combat capability, ARVN forces were not prepared for what happened at An Loc. They were still plagued by the same kinds of problems that had bothered them for the entire Vietnam War: politicized commanders, inept leadership, and tactical incompetence at the higher levels of command. The ARVN were victorious at An Loc because the American advisers and U.S. air power had negated the debilitating effects of these long-standing maladies.

Evidence is irrefutable that the South Vietnamese would not have performed as well as they did in the spring of 1972 if the American advisers and U.S. tactical air support had not been there. Unfortunately, the North Vietnamese proved this in 1975, after the advisers and U.S. tactical air support were gone, when they overran South Vietnam in just fifty-five days. Although some South

Vietnamese soldiers fought valiantly, the ARVN force as a whole, without the "steel reinforcing rods" provided by the American advisers and air support, crumbled precipitately.⁸ The North Vietnamese had suffered a strategic defeat in 1972, but they took the long-term approach to reap a greater victory in 1975, after the United States had departed and the South Vietnamese were left to their own devices. The ultimate result was that South Vietnam ceased to exist as a nation, and the United States lost the first war in its history.

APPENDIX

Order of Battle

Battle of Loc Ninh, 4-8 April 1972

ARVN

9th Regiment (2 battalions)
 1st Armored Cavalry Squadron
 74th Border Ranger Battalion
 1st Battalion Regional-Popular Forces
 1 105-mm Battery

***Task Force 52**

1st Battalion, 52d Regiment
 1st Battalion, 48th Regiment
 1 105-mm Battery

***Not in Loc Ninh itself**

NVA

5th VC Division
 E6 Regiment
 174th Regiment
 275th Regiment

 69th Artillery Division
 42d Artillery Regiment
 208th Rocket Regiment
 271st Antiaircraft Regiment

203d Tank Regiment

Elements of 202d Special Weapons
 Tank Regiment

429th Sapper Group(-)

Battle of An Loc, 9-15 April 1972

ARVN

5th Division
 7th Regiment (minus 1 battalion)
 8th Regiment
 Task Force 52
 1st Battalion, 52d Regiment
 1st Battalion, 48th Regiment
 3d Ranger Group

Binh Long Province Forces
 2 battalions of Regional-Popular Forces

NVA

9th VC Division
 271st Regiment
 272d Regiment
 95C Regiment

 203d Tank Regiment (2 battalions)

 Elements of 202d Special Weapons
 Tank Regiment

 69th Artillery Division
 42d Artillery Regiment
 208th Rocket Regiment
 271st Antiaircraft Regiment

 429th Sapper Group(-)

Battle of An Loc, 19–22 April 1972

ARVN

5th Division

7th Regiment (minus 1 battalion)

8th Regiment

Task Force 52

1st Battalion, 52d Regiment

1st Battalion, 48th Regiment

3d Ranger Group

1st Airborne Brigade (arrived 15 Apr)

5th Battalion

6th Battalion

8th Battalion

81st Airborne Ranger Battalion

Binh Long Province Forces

2 battalions of Regional-Popular Forces

NVA

9th VC Division

271st Regiment

272d Regiment

95C Regiment

203d Tank Regiment (2 battalions)

Elements of 202d Special Weapons

Tank Regiment

141st Regiment (7th NVA Division)

275th Regiment (5th VC Division)

69th Artillery Division

42d Artillery Regiment

208th Rocket Regiment

271st Antiaircraft Regiment

429th Sapper Group(-)

Battle of An Loc, 9 May–June 1972

ARVN

5th Division

7th Regiment (minus 1 battalion)

8th Regiment

Task Force 52

1st Battalion, 52d Regiment

1st Battalion, 48th Regiment

3d Ranger Group

1st Airborne Brigade (arrived 15 Apr)

5th Battalion

8th Battalion

81st Airborne Ranger Battalion

NVA

9th VC Division

271st Regiment

272d Regiment

95C Regiment

5th VC Division

174th Regiment

275th Regiment

E6 Regiment

141st Regiment (7th VC Division)

165th Regiment (7th VC Division)

Binh Long Province Forces
2 battalions of Regional-Popular Forces

203d Tank Regiment(-)

Elements of 202d Special Weapons
Tank Regiment(-)

69th Artillery Division
42d Artillery Regiment
208th Rocket Regiment
271st Antiaircraft Regiment

429th Sapper Group(-)

Battle Along QL-13, 5 April-June 1972

ARVN

21st Division
31st Regiment
32d Regiment
33d Regiment
9th ACR
15th Regiment

3d Airborne Brigade (thirty days only)

NVA

7th NVA Division
141st Regiment (departed for
An Loc, 16 Apr)
165th Regiment (departed for
An Loc, 7 May)
209th Regiment
101st Regiment (Independent)

Elements of 69th Artillery Regiment
208th Rocket Regiment(-)
42d Artillery Regiment(-)
271st Antiaircraft Regiment(-)

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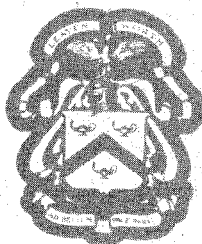
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